

Mexicans Puzzled by Azerbaijan Leader Monument

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A bronze statue of late Azeri President Geidar Aliyev in Mexico City. **Eduardo Verdugo**

The appearance of a life-size statue of Azerbaijan's "founder of the nation" on Mexico City's elegant Reforma Avenue, not far from Mahatma Gandhi, Abraham Lincoln and Mexico's national heroes, is raising eyebrows and protests.

The Stalinesque bronze statue of Geidar Aliyev, the late authoritarian leader of the Caucasus republic, carries a plaque calling him "a brilliant example of infinite devotion to the motherland, loyal to the universal ideals of world peace." The monument, erected in late August, shows Aliyev sitting in a bronze chair in front of what appears to be an enormous, white marble map of Azerbaijan.

"It is really out of place," said Miguel Angel Mendoza, an 18-year-old high school student who was walking past the monument to the longtime ruler, who led Azerbaijan first as Communist Party boss during Soviet times and then as president from 1993 to 2003. "Why couldn't they put up a monument to somebody who did something good?"

It turns out that Azerbaijan contributed much of the 65 million pesos (\$5 million) it cost to renovate not one, but two Mexico City parks, allowing it to put monuments in both. Critics say that Aliyev, who stifled dissent, shouldn't be on a boulevard decorated with statues to Mexican and foreign heroes.

"They probably have a warehouse full of these things somewhere" in Azerbaijan, said Daniel Gershenson, a human rights activist who was one of about a dozen protesters who demonstrated last week in front of the monument, holding banners that read "Get rid of the dictator!"

"It's like a personality cult, transferred to Mexico," said writer and activist Homero Aridjis, who described the style as "social realism from the Soviet era."

"It's as if they brought a dictator from Mars," Aridjis said. "Are we going to be a center for monuments to dead dictators? Who's next? Hitler? Stalin?"

It wouldn't be the first time that Azerbaijani PR efforts have drawn criticism. Rights groups protested Azerbaijan's hosting of the Eurovision Song Contest, and the militant feminist group Femen protested its hosting of this year's European Cup soccer championship.

Azerbaijan's ambassador to Mexico, Ilgar Mukhtarov, wrote that Azerbaijan has lavished attention on Mexico because it was one of the first countries to recognize Azerbaijan after the breakup of the Soviet Union.

"This monument is not intended to improve anybody's reputation because the world's perception of Heydar Aliyev does not require any rescuing," he said.

Aliyev's monument is surrounded by a manicured lawn and flower beds, and many people like the new park.

Brenda Torres, a 33-year-old architect, was relaxing on one of the four benches installed in front of the monument.

"The people who come here, they like it, right, but they don't know who he is," said Torres.

And that's the secret to Aliyev's success. Nobody really knows who he is.

A second Azerbaijani statue appears in the other park they paid to renovate, Tlaxcoaque Park.

It depicts a woman, her arms uplifted in mourning, commemorating Khojaly, a village where hundreds of Azerbaijanis were reportedly killed during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Advocates say a monument to Mexican suffering would have been more appropriate for a site once used as a police interrogation and torture center.

The office of Mexico City Mayor Marcelo Ebrard, who accepted the donations and attended the inauguration of both sites, did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

But at the inauguration of the first monument, Ebrard said: "We are very thankful to the Republic of Azerbaijan, because the truth is we haven't received an investment this big" from a foreign government before.

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